

Porous Bodies in Mumbai: An Analysis of the Urban Landscape in Rohinton Mistry's Novels

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry's work mainly focuses on the life of the marginalized and their struggle to survive against human ambition and political corruption, and Mumbai is frequently the meeting point of many of his characters. In this paper, I analyze the writer's conception of the urban landscape from an ecocritical perspective, applying material ecocriticism's theories and exploring the city as a porous body. Cities are compounds of matter and energy in mutual transformation with human and non-human beings, living and non-living matter (Alaimo 2008, Tuana 2008, Iovino 2014). Through the application of the concept of porosity, I show how Mistry's characters are directly affected by what happens in the city. The city, on the other side, is also deeply transformed by human ambition, the tyranny of those in power, and the dirtiness and chaos resulting from social abuse.

Keywords: material ecocriticism, porosity, trans-corporeality, body, power relations.

Today, 54 percent of the world's population lives in metropolitan areas and the percentage will most likely be higher in the next few decades.¹ The construction of cities involves a deep transformation of a physical natural environment into a built area. However, such transformation does not stop there. On the contrary, it continues working in much deeper and multidirectional levels throughout time: "The city transforms the surrounding area, affecting the natural environment. In turn, the natural environment provides critical natural resources, and can also impact the city" (Benton-Short and Short 18). In spite of such evidence, the self-limiting and excluding conceptualization of the city as a completely anti-nature construct was, for a long time, the only applicable model; a model based, nonetheless, on "a historical basis as a longstanding arrangement of physical landscape" (Buell 6). That is, with the rise of industrialization, humans sought to keep nature protected from social intrusion, and, at the same time, within reach to contemplate it. Nowadays, the global ecological crisis is making humans more conscious that "[t]he city is an integral part of nature and nature is intimately interwoven into the social life of cities" (Benton-Short and Short 4). The city may be conceived as "the material reality that shapes modernity" (Gersdorf 3), and it has undeniably become the ungraspable center of the global era. In this paper, the city will be understood as a hybrid and complex space where economic, social,

¹ See David Clark (2003).

and political issues continuously interflow with people and the natural landscape, each transforming and affecting the other.

India's fast-growing economy has favoured the construction of many urban spaces, frequently without much control.² Certainly, many Indian cities have prototypically taken the form of noisy and polluted places where worldliness and aspiration live together with poverty, racial injustice, and disillusionment. Rohinton Mistry's three novels are all set in Mumbai. Mumbai is the most inhabited space of India and the fourth most populated city in the world. It is also India's financial center, paradoxically characterized by uncontrollable problems of poverty, pollution, slum overpopulation, and traffic congestion. In his novels, Mistry establishes the often-present connections between the political and the ecological. His work focuses on the life of the marginalized and their struggle to survive against human ambition and political corruption, and Mumbai is usually the meeting point of many of his characters. My aim in this paper is to analyze the writer's conception of the urban landscape from an ecocritical perspective, applying material ecocriticism's theories, especially focusing on how the human body is affected by power relationships.

Material ecocriticism arises from the fields of social sciences and humanities in the twenty-first century. The new materialists respond to the actual global environmental destruction and argue that contemporary technological and economic developments need a redefinition of matter. This is a conclusion they reach based on discoveries achieved in natural sciences during the twentieth century and the most recent cases of ecological damage. Matter for them is not "a passive social construct but rather an agentic force that interacts with, and changes the other elements in the mix, including the human" (Iovino, "Steps to Material Ecocriticism" 135). The true nature of matter is then its "generative becoming" (Iovino and Oppermann, "Material Ecocriticism" 77).

The city is a form of matter in continuous interaction with other bodies, one affecting and transforming the other. It is an urban space in which we can perceive if we observe attentively, how matter produces its own meanings and tells its own stories. "Text" here, then, should not only be understood as "human material-discursive constructions," but also as any manifestation of matter: "water, soil, stones, metals, minerals, bacteria, toxins, food, electricity, cells, atoms, all cultural objects and places" (Iovino and Oppermann, "Material Ecocriticism" 83). All aspects of matter interconnect and affect our lives and bodies, and our lives affect the space where we live. That is, "the linguistic, social, political and biological are inseparable" (Hekman 25). Through the application of the concept of "porosity," explored by Nancy Tuana in her revealing essay (2008), I will show how Mistry's characters are directly affected by what happens in the city, their way of life, their bodies, even their perception of reality and life changes. The city, on the other hand, is also deeply transformed by human ambition, the tyranny of those in power, and the dirtiness and chaos resulting from social abuse.

² For further information, see Anaya Roy (2009).

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian writer of Parsi ancestry who has lived in Canada since 1975. His novels and short stories are often set in post-Independent India and, as Peter Morey affirms, they may be described as “novels of memory” (24), in which he recalls the Mumbai (in those days Bombay) of his childhood and youth. His characters’ lives, moreover, are directly affected by the political and often corrupted decisions of the ruling classes. Such decisions affect and “contaminate” the less favoured characters’ personal histories. The interconnecting scenario is always the city, where they have to follow and obey certain codes. Elizabeth Grosz maintains that citizens internalize certain social rules (in a kind of shared code) for the correct functioning of the urban space in which power relations are soon constituted:

Cities establish lateral, contingent, short—or long-term [sic] connections between individuals and social groups... The city’s form and structure provide the context in which social rules and expectations are internalized or habituated in order to ensure social conformity, or position social marginality at a safe or insulated and bounded distance (ghettoization). This means that the city must be seen as the most immediately concrete locus for the production and circulation of power. (35-36)

Similarly, in Mistry’s first two novels, *Such a Long Journey* (1991) and *A Fine Balance* (1995), the characters’ physical contact with the different urban spaces is always one of power in the context of global capitalism. These works offer a sharp criticism of Indira Gandhi’s policy, and, in a sense, they, as Morey points out, “can be read as a diptych, diagnosing the ills of a nation in the early 1970s” (93). *Such a Long Journey* is set in 1971, during the confrontation between India and Pakistan, but, on several occasions, it also alludes to the 1960s, when Nehru dies and his daughter, Indira Gandhi, becomes Prime Minister in 1966. *A Fine Balance*, on the other hand, develops during the Emergency that took place between 1975 and 1977, under the regime of Indira Gandhi. In both cases, the city of Mumbai is depicted as a place of corruption and tyranny, in which the less privileged layers of society are the most affected.

The government’s corruption spreads over the city, and its consequences are particularly visible in the most disadvantaged classes because, as Nast and Pile maintain, “Bodies become relational, territorialized in specific ways. Bodies and places are made up through the production of their spatial registers, through relations of power” (3). In other words, even though all human and non-human beings are exposed today to multiple environmental risks, the most disadvantaged are the first victims to receive the negative consequences of global capitalism, just because they do not have access to the same opportunities of health security, alimentation, and commodities. In this fashion, one of the characters in *A Fine Balance*³ asks himself: “What to do, bhai, when educated people are behaving like savages. How do you talk to them? When the ones in power have lost their reason, there is no hope” (525).

³ From now on, I will often use the following abbreviations to refer to Mistry’s novels: *FB* for *A Fine Balance*; *SLJ* for *Such a Long Journey*; and *FM* for *Family Matters*.

In the three novels under analysis, corruption extends from one microcosmic section of society to another, like a contagious disease without an antidote. An example of this is in Mistry's first novel, *Such a Long Journey* (1991), in which we read: "Municipal corruption was only a microcosmic manifestation of the greed, dishonesty, and moral turpitude that flourished at the country's centre . . . from the very top, whence all power flowed, there also dripped the pus of putrefaction, infecting every stratum of society below" (312-13). Tuana studies such inevitable transitions between bodies and power affairs in relation to the conceptual metaphor of "viscous porosity." She affirms that there exists

A viscous porosity of flesh—my flesh and the flesh of the world. This porosity is a hinge through which we are of and in the world. I refer to it as viscous for there are membranes that affect the interactions. These membranes are of various types—skin and flesh, prejudgements and symbolic imaginaries, habits and embodiments. (199-200)

Tuana includes the concept of viscous porosity within the theory of "interactionism," which "acknowledges both the agency of materiality and the porosity of entities" (191). This idea is suitable for Mistry's work. He shows that the lack of balance, and therefore porous relationships, between the local and the global, the rural and the urban, is the source of numerous ecological and economic imbalances, which result in profound class, gender, and caste disparities. In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry explores the disadvantages of capitalist modernization and expansion through the description of the deforestation of the hillside, where one of the main characters, Maneck, had his family home before moving to the city of Mumbai. The ecological damage resulting from this process of capitalist expansion becomes evident in the narrator's nostalgic mood:

But the day soon came when the mountains began to leave them. It started with roads. Engineers in sola topis arrived with their sinister instruments and charted their designs on reams of paper. These were to be modern roads, they promised, roads that would hum with the swift passage of modern traffic. Roads, wide and heavy-duty, to replace scenic mountain paths too narrow for the broad vision of nation builders and World Bank officials. (*FB* 213)

The inhabitants of the mountains were initially hopeful. "The greed that was sacrificing the country's natural beauty to the demon of progress" would stop, sooner or later, they thought. "But the road continued to inch upwards, swallowing everything in its path" (*FB* 213). Eventually, the landscape became desolate, empty of vitality and color: "The sides of their beautiful hills were becoming gashed and scarred. From high on the slopes, the advancing tracks looked like rivers of mud defying gravity, as though nature had gone mad" (213-14). Shacks and shanties, then, started to spread all over the hillside to be occupied by the jobless, who saw a big opportunity in the capitalist dream. "But the ranks of the jobless always exponentially outnumbered the jobs" (215), and hunger began to grow in the slopes at the same time that the

forests were devoured by industrialization. All these quotations from the novel serve as examples of the mutable and infinite interconnections that take place between the human body and the environment. This is a phenomenon referred to by Alaimo as “trans-corporeality”, that is, “the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from ‘nature’ or ‘environment’” (“Trans-corporeal Feminisms” 238).

Trans-corporeality is “a space of intrusion.” Pollution, illnesses, and toxins enter the body “without consent” (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 83). The “trans-corporeal” relationship of Mistry’s characters to the urban space is one of vulnerability because of their precarious daily lives. In *Family Matters* (2002), for instance, we read: “A blast of diesel fumes made him cough. Bloody pollution. This was no city for deep breathing!” (297). Moreover, everything they are or are not is related to their service to the city. This notion is quite connected to Grosz’s understanding of the urban space as “a complex and interactive network which links together... a number of disparate social activities processes, and relations” (32). The human body is then never indifferent to its surroundings. On the contrary, it is in continuous transit with economic, political, social, and cultural aspects, which makes it essentially helpless, especially if the individual does not have an affluent condition.

The body has a major presence in Mistry’s works. It normally appears in relation to the concepts of purity and pollution, “as a visceral, leaky, malfunctioning and vulnerable entity (Morey 8). In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry equates the mutilation and castration of the landscape, in the course of capitalist expansion, with that of the human body. Two of the main protagonists, particularly Ishvar and Om, uncle and nephew respectively, and other members of the Dalit community, suffer an unbelievable violence on the part of an oppressive hierarchical caste system. Cases of abuse, castration, mutilation, and torture come, on occasions, to touch even the grotesque. Such is the price that the most disadvantaged classes are obliged to pay in their longing for a better life, or just for the mere opportunity of surviving.

When Ishvar and Om return to their village in order to prepare the latter’s future wedding, they come across Thakur Dharansi, the upper caste man who years earlier had killed all the members of their family (except Ishvar and Om, as they were in Mumbai), in revenge for defying the rigorous caste system. Ishvar and Om, and of course the rest of their family, are born in the Chamaar caste, one of the subcastes belonging to the untouchables or Dalits. After suffering many calamities, Ishvar’s father decides to rebel against their fixed, inherited condition and sends his sons, Ishvar and his brother Narayan (Om’s father), to learn the profession of tailoring, an occupation strictly forbidden among the Chamaars. When they meet Thakur Dharansi, Ishvar and Om are firstly subjected to sterilization, a measure applied during the Emergency for birth control to all the inhabitants of the village, but not to the temporal visitors: “They were pushed onto the desks and their pants were removed. Ishvar started to weep. ‘Please, Doctorji! Not my nephew! Cut me as much as you like! But forgive my nephew! His marriage is being arranged!’” (*FB* 524). Later, due to the side effects of a botched surgery, Isvha ends with his two legs amputated and Om castrated: “Om’s pants were taken off for the second time. A rag soaked in

chloroform was gripped at his nose. He tore at it briefly, then went limp. With a swift incision the doctor removed the testicles, sewed up the gash, and put a heavy dressing on it” (526).

In contrast with these cases of power oppression and the ever changing and dangerous city world, rituals in Mistry’s work are linked to the security of the known and familiar (Morey 74). Rituals are performed not only to reaffirm the characters’ religious beliefs, but also to escape from the chaos, corruption, and dangers Mumbai encloses. Mistry’s second novel, *Such a Long Journey*, is also settled in Mumbai. Gustad, the main character, resides in the Parsi middle-class complex called Khodadad Building. He lives obsessed with keeping his family, friends, environment, and house immaculate. A blackout paper was placed in the windows of his apartment during the 1971 war, and left there a long time after, keeping him and his family isolated from the frightening urban reality. However, it also blocks them out of real life. Gustad’s wife, Dilnavaz, protests: “Weeks went by, then months, with paper restricting the ingress of all forms of light, earthly and celestial. ‘In this house, the morning never seems to come’... By and by, she learned new ways to deal with dust, webs, and household pests. The family grew accustomed to living in less light, as if blackout paper had always covered the windows” (*SLJ* 11).

Another of Gustad’s multiple obsessions is a black wall that separates the Parsi community of Khodadad Building from the metropolitan chaos of Mumbai. The Parsis represent a small minority in India. They are especially concentrated in this city, and, as Molnár points out, the wall “serves as a continual reminder of the Parsi community’s complex richness, but also of its isolation from the majority Hindu community” (36). The wall separates worlds: the comfort and protection of the home from the chaos, pollution, and dirtiness of the city. This feeling of protection starts to disappear, when the wall becomes transformed into a public latrine by passers-by. The wall in itself acts as a symbol of porosity. The noises, the bad smells, the insects all cross the boundaries between the compound and the big city.

In order “to make it pure” and avoid the government’s decision to demolish the wall to widen the road, Gustad decides to hire a street artist to transform the wall into a shrine with paintings of gods, prophets, and saints, representative of the different religions in India. This process of beautification initially proves an immediate success, and the wall transforms from public improvised toilet into a place of veneration and worship: “this way is the kind of miracle I like to see, useful and genuine... A stinking, filthy disgrace has become a beautiful, fragrant place which makes everyone feel good,” he says (*SLJ* 289). However, this hygienic process does not last long. The atrocities, pollution, dishonesty of the city end up infiltrating the life of the compound and contaminating Gustad, and the rest of the Parsi community, with a sense of hopelessness and vulnerability.

The city, as Grosz suggests, “is a reflection, projection or product of bodies... The city develops according to human needs and design” (33). However, it seems that this only works for the benefit of the political authorities and the upper classes, and the wall is finally demolished. The ending of *Such a Long Journey* seems, nonetheless, to suggest some hope for the future because after the wall is destroyed, Gustav decides to remove the blackout paper, allowing the

daylight to enter his house after a long time, but also, and more importantly, breaking the frontiers he has previously created (Gabriel 39). In the end, as Molnár points out, “spatial barriers are replaced by spatial freedom” (41).

In *A Fine Balance*, and unlike other works by Mistry, he transcends the Parsi community and concentrates on the criminalization of politics in the country. During the 1970s, jails were crowded with political enemies, media freedom was manipulated, and, within Indira Gandhi’s sinister twenty-point programme, measures like sterilization and beautification were included. In such a scenario and focusing on the three broad issues of gender, class, and power oppression (Baghirathi and Rajjamanickam 27), Mistry shows, as previously stated, a clear ecological concern for his native country. The city in *A Fine Balance* is depicted as the space where poverty, racial injustice, and disillusionment of the marginalized are very much present. As we read in the novel: “We don’t have to worry about cancer. This expensive city will first eat us alive for sure” (*FB* 85).

Mumbai is initially presented as the embodiment of dreams, the place where people can fight against loneliness, poverty, and caste. However, as the novel unfolds, Mistry depicts urban development as a greedy trading competition, leading to the transformation of the rural landscape into a disorienting and broken cityscape, in the name of a process of beautification, which also results in a highly asymmetrical flow of capital among the different social classes. “Beautification” is undisguisedly translated into slum clearance; that is, “clearing the poor away from areas they had improved and made habitable” (Câmpu, “History as a Marker” 49) for the higher castes. As in other developing countries, the dispossessed are the ones who suffer most the chaos and tyranny of those in power. In the novel, Indira Gandhi’s government supports the large-scale industrialization and globalization, but, instead of advancement and melioration, the outcome is one of destruction, sterilization, and identity crisis.

In this ecophobic environment, Mistry’s characters seem to be doomed to total disaster. The different places the author describes within the city, and which are inhabited by the lowest castes, reveal more a feeling of unattachment than a home sentiment: “Sometimes people have no choice. Sometimes, the city grabs you, sinks its claws into you, and refuses to let you go” (*FB* 197). This feeling of “lacking a place” (Morey 115) is further emphasized by the fact that the poor are consigned to peripheral parts of the city. The urban space becomes then a synonym of loneliness and alienation, in spite of its overcrowding. According to Iovino, “a city... is a porous body inhabited by other porous bodies... cities are compounds of matter and energy in mutual transformation with human and nonhuman beings, living and non-living matter, thus participating in the world’s ‘geochoreographies’” (“Bodies of Naples” 102).

Alaimo has also spoken of a “material ethics” in relation to the concept of trans-corporeality; that is, she examines the often-invisible forces that flow between “people, places and economic/political systems” (*Bodily Natures* 9). The material interconnections of bodies with non-human realities often result in ethical and political consequences, but they also imply a redefinition of the human. For the new materialists, the human is not a self-referential identity; on the contrary, he/she is part of an indivisible whole from the remaining manifestations of

matter. As Iovino and Opperman explain, “none of our intentional acts is limited to the sphere of ‘pure’ intentionality, but always situates itself within a setting of co-emerging material configurations. The awareness that no intentional action is ever outside this world of material-discursive emergences can help us refine our ethical categories ...” (“Material Ecocriticism” 86).

One of the immediate results of this change of perception is to make humans more conscious of every step they take and of its irreversible consequences. “In a knotted world of vibrant matter,” Bennett affirms, “to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself” (13). Or, in other words, to consume the world is, finally, to consume ourselves. According to Morey, “Mistry is a writer for whom morality is politics and politics is morality” (151). In his work, the writer exposes the existence of a tyrannical and ambitious political system that affects the characters’ habits of living, often ending in unethical and abusive relations among them. In a similar way, the city, because of the constant movements and actions of people, becomes profoundly transformed. In *Such a Long Journey*, Dr. Paymaster, speaking to friends and neighbours, compares India to a moribund gangrene patient and admits that the only way to end corruption is to remove the gangrenous focus, or, in other words, India’s central government:

Imagine, he said, that our beloved country is a patient with gangrene at an advanced stage. Dressing the wound or sprinkling rose water over it to hide the stink of rotting tissue is useless. Fine words and promises will not cure the patient. The decaying part must be excised. You see, the municipal corruption is merely the bad smell, which will disappear as soon as the gangrenous government at the centre is removed. (313)

In his latest novel, *Family Matters* (2002), Mistry returns to the issue of globalization and how it has affected the Parsi community. However, in this case, he transcends the boundaries of nation, ethnicity, and history, to concentrate on universal issues such as the family, aged care, death, immigration, sense of belonging, among others. The novel takes place in the 1990s, during the violent confrontations between Hindu and Muslims as a result of the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya issue,⁴ and again the city of Mumbai is much more than a mere location (Morey 173-74). Mistry offers detailed descriptions of the city, particularly focusing on its many handicaps: the extremely difficult life in the slums, the massive traffic with its resulting pollution and the unbearable stink of the streets. In fact, as Parui comments, “The novel actually is the representation of the degradation of moral and ethical values in different spheres of cosmopolitan societal life with its growing materialism, corruption and cheap politics” (3). More specifically, and as Câmpu sustains, “the political subtext of the novel is the growth of the fundamentalist Shiv Sena ideology and its repercussions on the life of the ordinary innocent citizens” (“History Matters” 68).

Family Matters’ main cast of characters deals with the lives of three generations in a Parsi family. One of the central characters, Nariman Vakeel, an old professor of English in his

⁴ For further information, see Pradeep K. Chhibber and Subhash Misra (1993).

seventies and sick with Parkinson's, is, like Gustav, haunted by the memories of the past. The past is always projected as a better time, empty of degradation. In this novel, porosity appears fundamentally through the topic of immorality. "Corruption is in the air we breathe," we read, "[t]his nation specializes in turning honest people into crooks" (*FM* 30). Throughout the novel, political corruption, represented by the abuses committed by the Shiv Sena towards the more disadvantaged classes, is irremediably transfused into individuals. The unethical and immoral political world depicted, becomes irremediably fused with the private common people's life.

When Yezad, Nariman's son-in-law, recalls his father's heroism and honest actions, he tells his kids, "Remember, people can take everything away from you, but they cannot rob you of your decency... You alone can do that, by your actions" (*FM* 226). This reference to how everything may change through one's actions proves to be true, when, as the novel unfolds, corruption spreads and extends, even over the most honest, though their only purpose behind such immoral actions, is frequently to fulfil their daily basic needs. It is, on several occasions, more a question of survival than of real crime. For instance, Yezad, out of desperation, ends up taking the few savings that his family has at home to gamble on the illegal lottery. His true intention, however, is to gain some extra money in order to cope with the costs arising from the care of Gustav, who after an ankle accident, is now living with him and his family.

Similarly, one of Yezad's two sons, Jehangir, the teacher's "golden boy" because of his very good grades and good nature, is tempted by three rich boys to take some money from them, so he can improve their low grades while working as a homework monitor. Yezad, in a moment of desperation, talking to his wife after visiting the teacher says, "The same corruption that pollutes this country is right here, in your own family..." (275). His wife, Roxana (Gustav's daughter), responds, "Do you know what nonsense you are talking? Can you hear yourself? Our son did not take the money to buy bubble gum or ice cream for himself. He did it to help his parents with food, and with his Grandpa's medicines" (275). As Morey maintains, "The question of how to identify the good course of action in a world seemingly devoid of moral absolutes casts a shadow over the best intentions" (127). Therefore, corruption, like weeds, is virtually impossible to boot. In a conversation between Yezad and his boss, the latter compares corruption with the way in which a banyan tree grows:

"Have you ever seen a banyan tree, Yezad?"

He nodded.

"You know how it grows? Its long branches send down aerial roots that go deep, become columns to support the branches that grow even larger while the roots spread over acres and acres."

"Yes, I've seen pictures. So what's the connection?"

"A municipal councillor tackling corruption is like a penknife trying to dig up a banyan tree." (319-20)

Political corruption is so difficult to eradicate that it also impregnates the body and the mind; that is, physical deterioration and immoral attitudes are linked to different examples of criminality in *Family Matters*. This aspect is also connected to the exploration of the narratives of matter and the concept of porosity. If, as Bennett states, we are living in a world of “vibrant matter” (2010), the body with its multiple transits is a fundamental subject in material ecocriticism.

The human body is considered by the materialists as “the middle place”; that is, “corporeal matter opens the patterns of agency to the structural interplay between the human and the nonhuman, being therefore crucial to overcome the idea of an ‘inert’ matter positioned as antithetical to free human agency” (Iovino and Oppermann, “Material Ecocriticism” 84). The body is then a kind of recipient or receptor of matter that intermingles with multiple contexts and can be translated into complex discourses, such as political, social, and technological (Iovino, “Steps to a Material Ecocriticism” 136). In Mistry’s work, “bodies are maps of corruption, pain and decay” (Morey 75). The body is a victimized recipient of globalization, a microcosm within the chaotic cosmos.

In the three novels under analysis, it may be observed how “[p]overty leaves its effect in the bodies and psyches of those it touches” (Tuana 203). The body appears in Mistry’s works in multiple forms: damaged, diseased, exhausted, mutilated, burnt in the form of ashes, or through hair as an extension of it. In addition, all these bodily transformations occur in their interaction with the city. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson maintains, “[we] transform constantly in response to our surroundings and register history on our bodies” (524). Therefore, the body is “a living text in which ecological and existential relationships are inscribed in terms of health or disease” (Iovino, “Steps to a Material Ecocriticism” 137). This is especially visible, as Alaimo argues, in “invisibly hazardous landscapes of risk society” (*Bodily Natures* 17), as any global city may be, and as Mumbai is unmistakably represented in Mistry’s work. Both the human body and the city become then porously intermingled.

This “movement across bodies” (2), which Alaimo, as previously explained, denominates “trans-corporeality,” has often unpredictable and undetectable effects. All is permeable, porous, and, therefore, connected. Thus, meaning is continuously taking place in spite of and without the—permanent—intervention of the human: “meaning is not a human-based notion. Rather, meaning is an ongoing performance of the world in its differential intelligibility” (Alaimo *Bodily Natures* 335). Obviously, the fact that all material elements are connected does not affirm that all of them are equal. Actually, the differences among them must be recognized, accepted, and respected in order to have a fluid and ethical communication. Trans-corporeality, then, demands, as Val Plumwood asserts, that humans “recognise both the otherness of nature and its continuity with the human self” (160).

Material ecocriticism, then, defends the idea that the world can no longer be perceived and interpreted as “pure exterior,” but as “knots in a vast network of agencies” (Iovino and Oppermann, “Material Ecocriticism” 1). Thus, there are no clear-cut boundaries separating the natural from the constructed. The theme of corruption and its relationship to the body have been explored in Mistry’s three novels, and we have observed how the urban landscape “decays”

humans, and humans “decay” the urban landscape. Grosz sustains that “cities have become (or may have always been) alienating environments, environments which do not allow the body a ‘natural,’ ‘healthy’ or ‘conductive’ context” (33). If this is not always the case, it is definitely a reality for the dispossessed and the Dalits of Mumbai, as Mistry and other Indian writers such as Arundhati Roy and Thrity Umrigar depict in their novels.

Through the application of the concept of porosity and its trans-corporeal transits, I have tried to show how “the world enters bodies” and “bodies deliver their stories to the world” (Iovino, “Bodies of Naples” 103). Via diverse themes, such as class distinction, corruption, poverty, and beggary, Mistry shows the harshness of surviving in the city. His final message seems to be that a “fine balance,” as read in the title of one of the novels analyzed, will never be achieved without the integration of progress in a respectful society that cares for the land and its people.

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